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Israel Lives

Its people show us how to fight, how to live, and how to fight by living.

By Kathleen Hayes

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I'm on my first visit to Israel, and there's something almost biblical about the Israeli people. Ever-emerging stories about October 7 continue to awe and humble me. From one of Israel's most celebrated writers I hear about a man on a kibbutz who heard the terrorists were coming and armed himself: one pistol, 30 bullets. The man knew the army was not coming, no one would save him, but he'd been trained as a sharpshooter so he had a plan. He would kill 29 terrorists, then himself. Before he could proceed, however, three tanks rolled in. They were driven by three girls, the writer said, from a neighboring army base, who hadn't waited for permission but had simply each got in a tank and driven to the kibbutz. The man, the girls and the kibbutz survived, which is why no one hears this story. Presumably it seems small compared to the stories of tragedy and heroism reported at the other kibbutzim: once-idyllic places whose names have taken on a doomed quality, like those of Nazi concentration camps. But lost in the swirl of heroic and tragic stories is this one, of a man who planned his final moments and three young women who changed the outcome.

Yet Israelis are not stuck in the past, in the horror of October 7. They are getting on with living, and fighting the terrorists behind those massacres. My first Friday evening in Jerusalem, we were invited to dinner with Rabbi Nolan Lebovitz of Valley Beth Shalom and his congregation. A few of the dozen or so seats remain empty, and we're told they're being saved for IDF soldiers who otherwise have nowhere to spend Shabbat. When the soldiers arrive, they're so young it hurts. One, from New Jersey, with thick glasses and a tumble of light brown hair, is so delicate and awkward I can't imagine him shooting a gun. He is fighting alongside his peers however, and seems stoic about it. He has every reason to be afraid, of course; soldiers here are dying all the time. But he gets on with defending his people, a blend of fragility and courage.

Meanwhile they live like no one I've ever seen. At moments of rest on the hottest of days, they break out in singing "Am Yisrael Chai," clapping their hands and dancing with wild abandon. Jerusalem's restaurants and shops are bustling; at ten o'clock at night the shopping mall is full of families, Jewish and Arab alike, going into shoe stores and eating ice cream. At a café one afternoon there's an announcement from the large group at the next table—a couple has decided to get married—and cries of "Mazel tov!" ring out. Israel

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Hezbollah rockets are making the north perilous and largely uninhabitable, and in private conversation they express fear about what's going to happen. There is no point in dwelling on these thoughts however; the best way of defying the death cult is by living.

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And war is an intrinsic part of this life: unwanted, unavoidable, but now so clearly just. At first I'm startled to see so many people—soldiers and civilians, male and female—toting weapons, but accept it immediately. This is what it means to preserve, against all odds, a state for the Jewish people. Soldiers with machine guns at their hips coo over babies in strollers, walk through the streets of the Old City. Yishai Fleisher, our guide to Hebron, emerges from his apartment that morning wearing tefillin; when he reappears a half hour later, the tefillin has been replaced by a machine gun. It sounds incongruous, but isn't. I might wish it weren't so, but one complements the other.

One day we visit the Gaza envelope with Rabbi Pini Dunner's congregation, Young Israel of North Beverly Hills. After an emotionally harrowing visit to Kibbutz Be'eri and the Nova festival site, we go to Sderot City Hall to meet the mayor, where we are told we must wait. It's hot; everyone is tired. We're milling around upstairs, fighting boredom and irritability with varying degrees of success, when we hear singing and a flute playing downstairs. The music proceeds up the stairs, and I see the flutist is the tall dark Israeli who acts as the group's security guard. He has a machine gun at his hip and a flute at his lips, and he leads a sweet melody which others immediately join in singing. No one seems to find anything odd about holding a concert in a dreary vestibule in Sderot's City Hall. In America, security guards would bustle the disruption away immediately. Here the music comes from security, and no one bats an eye—in fact it seems entirely fitting.

That morning we've woken to the news that back at home, an antisemitic horde attacked our neighborhood, Pico-Robertson. The videos we watched in disbelief over our cellphones have graphically reminded us why Israel was founded as a haven for the Jewish people, why it matters. But Israel is so much more than that. Its people show us how to fight, how to live, and how to fight by living.

Kathleen Hayes *is the author of "Antisemitism and the Left: A Memoir."*

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